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ABSTRACT

Learning disabled writers are unable to incorporate text structures to plan their writing; they stop writing before their point is stated; their writing includes redundancies, irrelevancies, and many mechanical and spelling problems. Studies indicate that learning disabled writers use simplistic and/or ineffective planning strategies while composing essays. Therefore, it makes sense to spend weeks on writing instruction before students write for a grade. During this time, teachers should provide checklists for good writing qualities, questions for peer review, and practice and examples of other student writing. Teachers should also provide students with something to which they can compare their work. Students must understand where their own weaknesses lie before they can incorporate any improvement strategy. Teachers should also model the writing process. But of course most important is that students write and write and write some more. Sometimes they find it helpful, though, to be reminded before they begin of what constitutes good writing. Other helpful strategies can come in the form of classroom management techniques, i.e., outlines of class lectures and study guides of topics to be covered. According to Vygotsky, the idea is to "make visible the normally invisible cognitive process" of writing so that learning disabled students can "see the actions and hear the inner dialogue that directs cognitive behavior." (Contains 11 references.) (TB)

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"Packing Balloons in High Winds" : Meeting the Needs of the Mildly Handicapped in the Regular Classroom

by Angela Creech Green

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"Packing Balloons in High Winds" : Meeting
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> I was unfitted for schoolwork, and though I worked often well for weeks together, I had to give the whole evening to one lesson if I was to know it. My thoughts were a great excitement, when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind. I was always near the bottom of my class and always making excuses (Yates qtd. in Miner 1992, 372).

This quote could have been spoken by any one of thousands of students with learning disabilities. It is quoted, however, from the autobiography of the Nobel Prize poet William Butler Yeats. It reflects the essential truth of being learning disabled in a regular classroom. Learning disabled students must work harder, often with less success, and feel obligated to justify to themselves, their parents, teachers and peers why they are unable to succeed. Trying to succeed is indeed like trying to pack a balloon in a shed on a windy day. As teachers of the mildly disabled in a regular classroom, it becomes necessary to engage in activities which will enable these students to find a resting place for this wayward balloon and help find solutions to this

frustrating experience we call an education.

As English teachers, we all know what it takes to succeed in the regular English classroom. We can all distinguish between the skilled and unskilled writers, and it takes only a matter of seconds to begin the list of what the unskilled student cannot do.

Much of the literature addressing students with learning disabilities reflects the deficiencies by which they are recognized. Learning disabled writers are unable to incorporate text structures to plan their writing; they stop writing before their point is stated; their writing includes redundancies, irrelevancies , and many mechanical and spelling errors. Englert, Fear and Anderson discovered students with learning disabilities have little understanding of the writing process or of the strategies needed to organize expository writing. Consistently incorporating revision strategies simply does not occur (Newcomer, 1991). The list of failures and inabilties continue from journal articles to conferences to written responses to the teachers' lounges. We know what these students can not do.

Studies indicate that learning disabled writers use simplistic and/ or ineffective planning strategies while composing essays filled with everything they know about the subject without concern for its importance or impact (Newcomer, 1991). Wong and Blenkinson found in 1989 that learning disabled students' writing is often not as lucid or interesting as a typical student's writing which could be because they do not seem to have a clear understanding of purpose or audience. Moran and Vogal (1982) also determined that there is usually a deficit in the number of words, subordinate

clauses and sentences in their compositions, more errors in punctuation, subject-verb agreement and mechanics (Newcomer 587). It is evident that learning disabled students are not meeting the criteria set for the students of the regular English classroom. But we knew that before we began.

Therefore, it appears that we have two choices as instructors. We know learning disabled students will require more energy to teach than students without disabilities. Therefore, we can spend our time trying to teach or we can grumble, complain and even refuse to teach about the lack of abilities our learning disabled students possess. I personally feel the responsibility of attempting to determine effective strategies for successfully incorporating these students into the regular classroom. It is probably the most frustrating aspect of my teaching, yet by law, both moral and political, I am required to meet the needs of all of the handicapped students in my classroom. So where do I begin?

Before beginning, it becomes necessary to understand the fundamental concepts and strategies of writing. There are two kinds of organizational knowledge that determines successful writing performance. The first is an understanding of the recurring patterns in writing. The second is the understanding of writing strategies which when incorporated create more developed writing (Englert, 1989). Learning disabled students usually lack both of these skills.

It is also necessary to acknowledge the impossibility for success without cooperation from the student. I in no way am laying the total responsibility of success on the teacher.

However, it is our job to continue for as long as it takes to provide strategies that will one day direct the student towards acceptable standard writing. It seems, however, that most teachers in "regular" classrooms desire and need more instruction and direction in order to achieve success with their mildly handicapped students.

In my own composition classes, I spend weeks on writing instruction before I ever have the students write for a grade. During this time, I provide checklists for good writing qualities, questions for peer review, practice and examples of other student writing to begin the ground level of my plan. My plan is this: before they ever write for a grade, they thoroughly understand the writing process and any hindrances that may prohibit their success as writers. Therefore, they understand what constitutes deficiencies in writing before they feel the pressure of writing for grades.

According to Englert, the same principle applies well with the mildly handicapped student. Englert encourages instructors to inform the handicapped writers the specific differences between their writing and the skills of a proficient writer. He believes writers must be made "explicitly aware of and in control of writing strategies" (1989, 19).

A second strategy is to provide students with something with which they can compare themselves. Students must understand where their own weaknesses lie before they can incorporate any improvement strategy. I like to call this my "reality therapy." Students need to know from the very beginning what they must do in

order for their writing to reach the level of acceptability. If done with kindness, genuine concern, and encouragement, the students will not feel further "pushed down" but will understand the reality of their situation, and if provided with strategies for success, will have new hope for their writing endeavors. It is possible for a student to succeed if he or she first understands how much work is required to achieve his or her goals.

Another helpful strategy to help the mildly handicapped student writer is to see the writing process modeled. If done in small steps with the students observing and actively participating, they can "practice new learning, integrate new learning with old, and generalize learning to applied situations" (Cannon, 1992,p. 306).

Following this strategy, peer review and collaborative learning continues to aid these students in more positive development in their writing. Englert and Troy encourage this procedure by heterogeneous grouping--mixing mildly handicapped writers with skilled writers (1991). Since good writers learn by reading great writing, it also follows that learning disabled writers can come to a better understanding of what constitutes good writing by reading good quality writing done by their more skilled peers.

DRAFTING STAGE

Once the students are actually involved in the writing process, there are other activities that serve as useful and productive strategies.

Although talking about the necessary components of writing is important, students do not become writers by merely understanding theory alone. They must write, write, write and write some more. This, however, does not appear to be the most common practice in the classroom. Research by Christensen (1989) suggests that learning disabled students spend "more time filling in blanks on worksheets, copying, or answering multiple choice items than actually writing" (221). Englert (1991) furthermore recognizes that language instruction tends to examine elements of mechanics rather than focus on the writing process. Newcomer (1991) states, "Practice and opportunity to write may increase mechanical skills but are not sufficient to enable students to internalize the strategies necessary to overcome their comprehensive problems in writing" (p. 589). Cannon (1992) suggests using not texts or workbooks but specific and individual learning objectives to direct ones instruction.

Our goal in the classroom is not to memorize rules but to write. Noting and correcting mechanical errors is part of the revision process not the prewriting or drafting. It seems that many teachers not only focus on mechanics but even reward students for their knowledge in this area without acknowledging the grammatically correct essay might offer not one single worthy idea.

Yeats stated in his autobiography, "Sometimes we had essays to write, and . . .I never got a prize for the essays were judged by handwriting and spelling" (qtd. in Miner, 1992, p. 372). This shameful policy continues too often in the composition classroom. Not only does it repress the confidence level of the students, but

it also changes the emphasis of writing from the content to the appearance of the piece as dictated by the teacher (Englert, 1991).

If teachers focus on mechanics, something most learning disabled students are not confident in anyway, they inhibit the creative and logical thinking of their students. Most learning disabled students already have a history of failure (Adams, 1985). The fear of errors and failure become more significant than their desire to put into words their ideas. This pedagogical position continues to adversely effect the students' self-concept as writers and their assumptions about writing. The understanding of grammar and mechanics is important. Adams suggests that students memorize spelling and punctuation rules to place in their long term memory because of short term memory deficits. In this way students can focus first on expressing their ideas and secondly on "cleaning up" their writing (1985, p. 263).

During the actual writing, there continues to be helpful teaching actions for producing better writing. The interesting aspect of these suggestions is that they are simple and do not require extra class time to implement. For example, many students write better papers after hearing simple reminders of what constitutes good writing.

Poplin encourages teachers to begin before the writing begins by carefully choosing topics and writing for real purposes such as publication. An interesting choice of topics is imperative for the student who either cannot or has not performed well as a writer (1982). Newcomber suggests daily activities which integrate across the curriculum writing as well as sustained writing in order to

provide students more time to develop their ideas. His research also found that students with poorer spelling and fluency skills seemed to improve when writing on a word processor (1991). There are a number of helpful strategies to motivate the inhibited and previously unsucessful writer.

Other helpful strategies can come in the form of classroom management techniques. Offering outlines of class lectures and study guides of topics to be covered, providing visual aids such as overhead transparencies or copies of well-written essays as examples to follow are very helpful.

Vygotsky believes that if we can "make visible the normally invisible cognitive process" of writing, we can teach our learning disabled students to "see the actions and hear the inner dialogue that directs cognitive behavior" (qtd in Englert, 1991, p. 340).

Vygotsky further offers an instructional plan for succeeding to make the thinking that proceeds writing understandable to the students. He suggests that at first the teacher must talk herself through the process. Then, he says, the "monologue soon gives way to a collaborative 'social dialogue' in which learners assume increasing responsibility (qtd. in Englert, 1991, p. 340). As the teacher is talking, she asks the questions a skilled writer would ask while composing which models for the learning disabled student creative thinking skills.

Adams further encourages teachers with mildly handicapped students to explain their lesson slowly, to tape lectures and to write significant terms on the board. In extreme cases, he advises teachers to allow students more time in class or to take writing

assignments home (1985).

MacArthur and Graham discovered that students create better compositions when they were freed from the physical constraints of writing. They offer the option of dictating stories, their compositions were significantly longer, of higher quality and contained fewer grammatical errors than their written ones (1987). Roth and Speakman also support dictating compositions as possible option to the usual prewriting and writing activities (1986). Newcomber notes that the benefits of dictating compositions which help the learning disabled student does not provide equal improvement with typical learners (1991).

Naturally, we English teachers do not feel comfortable teaching writing unless the students are indeed writing. However dictating their compositions into a tape player and then writing down what they said many provide a successful format for the leaning disabled student's writing process.

Practically every researcher supports modifying the curriculum or offering alternative choices in order to meet the individual needs of the students. Cannon believes it is necessary "to correlate different teaching practices according to learner aptitude" (1992, p. 301). He concedes that it is an exhausting business but pressing obligation that we owe students. Finally, after teaching the components of writing and mechanics and modeling the process, the student needs supervised practice and extensive repetition and review.

Ultimately, the goal for the learning disabled student is that he or she can confidently and accurately monitor his/her own

writing performance using the strategies they have been taught (Newcomber,1991).

Most learning disabled students do not want the "easy way out." They do not resent working unless they are unable to sense progress. As teachers, we have the responsibility to our students to "teach" them not lecture to them. Telling them how to write will not succeed in developing a good writer, so we must show them how. Taking for granted they will understand if we say it is also a mistake. We will probably need to say it, model it, repeat it, explain it and practice it again and again until one day, our students can do it in the small sequence of steps that eventually creates a well-written composition.

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